

The success of anti-system parties in the Austrian election reflects very real problems with political corruption

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Austria's elections on 29 September produced the worst electoral showing for the country's two major parties, the SPÖ and ÖVP, since the end of the Second World War. As [Fabio Wolkenstein](#) writes, the main beneficiaries were smaller parties, particularly those articulating anti-system sentiments. Far from relying on empty rhetoric, however, he argues that the success of such parties reflects real problems with corruption in the Austrian political system. Chief amongst these is the role of party patronage in key appointments, which perpetuates inequality and allows corrupt practices to continue over time.



In the Austrian general election on 29 September, the Social Democrats (SPÖ) and their coalition partner, the conservative People's Party (ÖVP), maintained their position as the two strongest parties in Austria with 26.82 and 23.99 per cent of the vote, respectively. However, it was also the two major parties' worst electoral showing since the end of World War Two. And tightly behind the conservatives, the populist radical right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ) came in third with 20.51 per cent of the votes, increasing its vote share by 2.97 per cent since the last general election in 2008.

The populist radical right's success in 2013 certainly did not come as a surprise, however. Far from being a marginal niche party, the Freedom Party has displayed considerable electoral continuity since the late 1980s, and everything pointed towards another high-profile result in 2013. Characteristically for parties of this kind, the Freedom Party's success is not only based on appeals for tougher immigration policies, but also on strong anti-system rhetoric. One FPÖ poster from the 2013 election campaign reads "red-black [i.e. SPÖ and ÖVP] have sold and betrayed us". Charges of this kind have been a core component of the populist radical right's rhetoric since its rise under Jörg Haider's leadership.

What was perhaps more surprising was that, in the campaign preceding the election, parties across the political spectrum adopted a range of anti-system themes that are typically associated with the populist radical right and their claim to fight a "corrupt elite" in the name of "the people". Perhaps most strikingly, the Green Party focused almost exclusively on the corruptness of, indeed, virtually all competitor parties. The Greens prided themselves on being the only

political party uninvolved in the recent corruption scandals surrounding the political establishment in Austria, and turned this into a unique selling point (as if there exist no other relevant Green issues to promote). "We are one hundred per cent organic – we are not at all corrupt", reads one slogan. The strategy was successful: the Greens increased their vote share, receiving 12.42 per cent of the votes.



Heinz-Christian Strache, Chairman of the FPÖ (Credit: Dieter Zirnig, CC-BY-SA-3.0)

And then there were two entirely new political parties, Team Stronach and the NEOS. The former, founded and chaired by 80-year-old billionaire Frank Stronach, also made ending corruption a main pillar of their agenda. Their campaign was replete with anti-system rhetoric: “Our country is governed behind closed doors. Do we want this nepotism, this corruption?” asks a stern voice in the party’s official election ad. The latter, formed predominantly by liberals and some disaffected conservatives, likewise made the need for political change the rationale of their campaign. On the party’s website, for example, chairman Matthias Strolz asserts the need to put an end to the existing system’s “stagnation, corruption, [and] lies”, suggesting that the status quo is a “tragedy” for the country. Both parties made the 4 per cent electoral threshold in their first ever election, gaining 5.73 per cent and 4.96 per cent of the vote, respectively – undoubtedly an astonishing success for two new political movements.

Anti-system rhetoric in Austrian politics

Should we therefore conclude that political parties of all stripes have jumped on the populist bandwagon, or that Austrian voters have a penchant for populist messages? Not necessarily. Rather, the disproportionate occurrence of what can be interpreted as classic populist themes – especially corruption and the opposition to the major political parties – points to actual shortcomings of the political establishment. Two factors show why anti-system themes are so persuasive in Austria, and why they should be taken seriously.

The first factor is structural: political parties, especially the SPÖ and ÖVP, penetrate Austrian state and society to a particularly high degree. Dating back to the time between the 1960s and the 1980s, when SPÖ and ÖVP held more than 90 per cent of the votes, many public and semi-public institutions are controlled by major parties – if only indirectly through networks of party members. Political scientists refer to this as party patronage. Disaffected citizens call it nepotism.

Indeed, up until the 1980s, party patronage was a mass phenomenon in Austria, often used to reward loyal party members. Party appointments were widespread, ranging quite literally from the general manager of the national mail company to the pool supervisor in public swimming pools. Notably, in the last decades patronage has become significantly more restrictive and geared toward gaining control over the institutions that matter for policy delivery. But any argument against party patronage is nonetheless likely to correspond with many citizens’ schemes of understanding the Austrian political cosmos.

The second factor is that systemic corruption is a very real problem in Austria, as recent events have shown. In October 2011, a parliamentary enquiry committee for corruption charges was established that brought to light a number of high-profile [corruption cases](#) in which all political parties except the Greens were involved. Examples include illegal party donations from semi-public institutions, cartel-like agreements between politicians and private investors concerning the privatisation of public enterprises, the misuse of public money for party advertisements, and the awarding of citizenship in return for external party donations. These cases figured prominently in the media, and undermined popular trust in political parties and politics more generally.

Clearly, systemic corruption is highly worrying, not least because of its adverse economic effects and negative public resonance. But party patronage is ultimately more concerning, for it is a crucial supporting condition for the survival of corruption over time. The reason is that patronage extends the network of party loyalty to institutions that do not traditionally belong to the party, which helps to effectively cover up the illegitimate activities of politicians. Parties can freely draw on a range of institutions beyond the party as organisational resources, not only to manage state and government infrastructure, but also to obtain additional funds.

If party patronage provides a structural underpinning for corruption, and correspondingly fuels discontent with centrist political parties, then this issue has to be addressed by the parties in question. One option is to privatise the institutions where patronage typically reaches, notably public and semi-private enterprises. This has been tried in Austria by the controversial conservative/radical right government between 2000-2007, and failed insofar as it resulted, for example, in the illegal agreements of politicians and private investors that are presently discussed by the parliamentary enquiry committee for corruption charges.

Another option, arguably high-minded but preferable to privatisation, would see parties restrain their exercise of patronage as a matter of principle, on the grounds that patronage practices undermine equality. Instead of counting as an isolated case, people who are appointed on the grounds of party loyalty exacerbate inequality in that they exclude all others from access to these positions. This might be a lot to ask, but it could provide the democratic nudge required to tackle existing problems of corruption and restore trust in both political parties and politics more generally.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPPE – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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